

## ***Ijime* (Bullying) in Japanese Schools: A Product of Japanese Education Based on Group Conformity<sup>1</sup>**

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*Ijime* (bullying) has become a common practice among Japanese school children today. It is usually the case that an individual who is labelled as ‘different’ is picked on, and that the majority of classmates stand against the individual. Significantly, such acts of *ijime* mirror group attitudes and behaviour learnt at school, where group conformity is highly regarded and any divergence from the group is punished. Japanese society represents cultural homogeneity, and training for uniformity forms the heart of Japanese education. Children are trained through group life at school to master the competency to conform to the group norm which is strictly required as a member of Japanese society. This paper highlights the tight connection between *ijime* and Japanese education based on group conformity, and examines the views and experiences of Japanese students in relation to *ijime* and peer relations in their classrooms. The students indicate the existence of a high level of peer pressure among individuals who compete between one another to demonstrate their competencies for uniformity. Their voices suggest that Japanese education, which places an emphasis on training for group conformity, plays a strong contributory part in children engaging in *ijime* behaviour.

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### **Introduction**

*Ijime* is the word for bullying in Japanese. The Ministry of Education in Japan defines *ijime* as a particular form of aggression, physical or psychological, which is carried out unilaterally and continuously against someone weaker than the perpetrator/s, which the victim him/herself finds detrimental (Monbushō *Ijime Mondai Kenkyūkai* (hereafter MIMK), 1997:3). A more concrete description provides a picture of an individual who diverges from the ‘average’ or the ‘majority’, in other words, who does not conform to the group norm, is targeted by a group of peers. Japanese students accord high respect to those who can foster group harmony (Sengoku, 1991:20). Simultaneously, they disrespect and disapprove being different from others. Japanese children exhibit this favouritism to those who can conform, by their strong rejection, often expressed by indifference and sarcastic attitudes, towards those who stray from the group standard. Excessive rejection often causes aggression which does turn into *ijime* behaviour.

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*Ijime* occurs at every school level but most frequently at junior high school level (i.e. among children aged between 12 and 15). The incidence tends to rise among higher grades at elementary level, reaching a peak at junior high school level with the figure indicating a rise of at least 20 to 50 percent (MIMK, 1997:14; Sōmuchō Seishōnentaisakuhonbu, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000). The Foreign Press Centre (hereafter FPC) (2001:19) states that “bullying [*ijime*] is an extreme manifestation of the propensity of the Japanese to preserve group homogeneity by expelling those who are different”. It is particularly important to take a close look at the level of educational influence on cultivating children’s group behaviour at school, as the propensity to preserve group homogeneity is found throughout the Japanese school system, and is reflected in the ways in which children are treated, educated, and trained in classrooms. Japanese schools provide education that nurtures the images, ideas, and skills to conform, but also create the sphere for these to transform into a particular form of aggression or violence, such as *ijime*.

Hendry (1987:96) points out that schools in Japan at all levels are extremely ordered and efficiently and systematically allocate to children the roles which await them in their later life in the adult world. Shimahara (1992:26) states: “The Japanese deemed uniformity essential to promote egalitarianism and to upgrade the adaptive competencies of the entire population to be compatible with the needs of developing industry and higher standards of living”. While academic curricula play a major role in schooling, training for uniformity forms the heart of Japanese education as a means to provide a set of rules and disciplines in order to shape attitudes and behaviours of children, shaping the child for his/her membership in Japanese society. The training for uniformity is carried out constantly in a friendly environment, and children become independently responsible for their group attitudes and behaviour that emphasise peer solidarity. What systematically emerges in such a school environment is a certain degree of peer control and peer group pressure involved in social interactions among children, who compete between one another to demonstrate their competence for uniformity. *Ijime* is the manifestation of the excessive zeal for uniformity, reflected as a dark side of group attitudes and behaviour in peer socialisation which requires the elimination of those who are different.

This paper represents an attempt to shed light on the association between *ijime* behaviour and the negative aspect of Japanese education that enhances the importance of group conformity and encourages the punishment of those who do not conform. It explores the risks involved in the process of educating uniformity and the standardisation of individuals in terms of normalising *ijime* behaviour within the school system. The paper includes some important voices of Japanese students which were recorded during my short visits to four public junior high schools in Tokyo and Kobe, Japan in 2004. The participants were the third year junior high school students aged between 14 and 15 from middle class background. It is noted that the views and experiences given by the students who participated in my interviews do not necessarily reflect those of all Japanese students. However, the voices of the students extracted in this paper need to be heard and represent

a reality students in Japan generally experience at school. The names of the interview participants are replaced by pseudonyms.

### ***Ijime*: alienation of ‘different’ individuals**

*Ijime* can take many forms including verbal or physical threats. However, one fascinating form of *ijime* is ostracism, by which a group of individuals isolate a particular individual (Crystal, 1994; FPC, 2001). *Ijime* that takes the form of alienation represents a particularly mean and cruel form of punishment for Japanese children (Crystal, 1994:250-251). The isolated individual is completely dehumanised by the brutal treatment of exclusion, and as a result of the dehumanisation, the individual is made to feel his/her central core is degraded or lost (Maniwa, 1990). It is usually the case that those who carry out *ijime* are ordinary students who are well behaved, so that teachers and parents disbelieve rumours or reports of cruelty about them (Wetherall, 1985:65). They are dominant and successful individuals (Watts, 1998:152), who have good profiles, such as intelligence, good social skills and popularity in their classrooms (Sugimori, 1999). These bullies single out a particular individual who is labelled as different from others—‘the majority’ (Suzuki and Oiwa, 1996:52; Tobe, 1998) and does not fit into a group (Wetherall, 1985:65), due to his/her appearance, behaviour, or action that deviates from the group standard (Lebra, 2004:141).

The form of ‘a group against one’ is the key feature of *ijime* (Ishizaki, 1986:38), and is prevalent throughout all school levels including elementary, junior high and senior high schools (Tobe, 1998:65). *Ijime* can take place where more than three persons are interacting (Serizawa, 1995), and can involve the majority of the classroom (Morita and Kiyonaga, 1989). *Ijime* is usually structured by four groups of children: the bully (*ijimekko*) who acts as the main perpetrator, the victim (*ijimerarekko*) who is a target of victimisation, the audience (*kanshū*) who encourages or participates in *ijime* activities, and the bystanders (*boukansha*) who silently look on or pretend not to see it (Morita and Kiyonaga, 1989). With these four groups involved, *ijime* can become a classroom activity in the form of all-against-one, in which a whole class victimises an individual student (Mihashi, 1987; Jinbo, 1998). Mihashi (1987:21) states:

The group of bullies who actually perform the acts of bullying [*ijime*] is made up of only a few members, but...other classmates are part of the scene as onlookers or sometimes even timid participants. ...bullying [*ijime*] activates the class. Not only the actual bullies but also the rest of the class have been observed to become lively [actively involved].

One student describes the site of *ijime* as follows:

*The whole class got excited when the ijime began. Seven or eight bullies actually participated in bullying him, but others surrounded us saying “come on!” to encourage the situation.* (Toyota, 1994 cited in Jinbo, 1998)

It is the unfair quality of the system, in which the majority gangs up to victimise an individual, that makes *ijime* particularly vicious and insidious (Yamazaki, 1985;

Shinagawa, 1988), and *ijime* escalates, because the more suffering and hopelessness the victim is made to experience, the greater the reward of more fun and pleasure for the bullies (Lebra, 2004:206).

Among the four groups outlined above, the largest number of children fall into the category of silent bystanders (Endou and Konno, 1996). Murakami (1985:411) states that "Classmates and playmates close their eyes to the victimisation of their fellows. ...Bullying [*ijime*] escalates to extremes because children close their eyes to others' misfortunes". Many remain as silent bystanders, who look on or pretend not to see the victimisation of their peers, due to the fear of becoming the next victim (Kawamura, 1995:30; Uchida, 1995:131; Endou and Konno, 1996; MIMK, 1997:76; Lebra, 2004:143). The situation can be further aggravated where no one acts to intervene, including teachers. Behind *ijime* incidents, the issue of cover-ups often exists within school organisations. Teachers and school authorities deny the existence of ongoing *ijime* itself (Tsuchiya and Tsuchiya, 1993; Asahi Gakusei Shinbunsha (hereafter AGS, 2002) to protect the reputation of the teacher, his/her class, or of the school (Lebra, 2004:144). The reality continues to stay negative as many cases remain undetected or untreated (Woronoff, 1997:220; MIMK, 1997; AGS, 2002). *Ijime* often denotes the complete isolation of an individual, who is disapproved, unwanted, and neglected by his/her organisation.

### **Japanese education based on group conformity**

One of the issues that arises with *ijime* is the role of Japanese education that places an emphasis on group conformity, which generates the idea and behaviour of alienating individuals who stray from the group norm. Significantly, training, rather than teaching, of uniformity begins at the preschool level. Peak (1991:187) refers to preschool as the place to learn group behaviour, and to introduce children to group life in preparation for school (Hendry, 1987:45), which represents group life or life in a group, rather than a place of learning (Peak, 1991:6). Although it is not compulsory, the preschool is regarded as an important part of early education, and nearly all children attend preschool (normally two years) before they enter school at age six (Hendry, 1987).

In the minds of Japanese parents and educators, the most important goal of the preschool experience is training in the habits and attitudes appropriate to group life, such as enthusiasm, openheartedness, enjoyment of being with other children, and identification with classroom standards of behaviour (Peak, 1991:185). A key feature of educating uniformity is its on-going training in group life which is carried out without a written code or authority. It is the classroom training, through accustoming children to the routine and schedule of the school day and inculcating habits and rituals of group life, that indirectly teaches children group attitudes and behaviour (Peak, 1991:186), and, it is through the implicit structure and expectations of the preschool environment that children acquire group-oriented behaviour and attitudes (Peak, 1991:187).

Without a written code or authority, the group plays a significant role in standardising behaviour of children. Peak (1991:189-190) states: "In Japan the group is both the unsympathetic force to which the child's ego must submit and the primary source of companionship and fulfillment. It represents a diffuse and nonpersonified yet unassailable

authority". The group is therefore constantly utilised in training group uniformity throughout the school system, and it is the 'diffuse nonpersonified yet unassailable authority' of the group that prevents children from straying from the group norm or 'normality'. Children are treated as one group of individuals, not as dozens of separate individuals (Komiya, 1996:70), and are required to learn to control their egoistic and regressive tendencies as a member of a group (Peak, 1991:189).

The training in group life necessitates two essential principles, 'participation' and 'cooperation', which arise in order to enforce and maintain order of group conformity. Sato (2004:74) states that "universal participation is one hallmark of Japanese egalitarian sentiments that is foremost on teachers' minds in their daily classroom decisions". Ben-Ari (1997:20) also states: "...to develop 'normally' a Japanese child *must* be part of a group. She or he *must* participate in group activities [group life] (*shudan seikatsu*)". Attempts are made to ensure that children develop a desire to participate in group activities with others and find enjoyment in that participation. The need for cooperation is also enhanced, and children are trained to become cooperative with others within the group. As tactics to teach children the two principles, teachers indicate that 'to behave like everyone else' is an ideal behaviour, and demonstrate explicit consequences that those who disobey participation or co-operation will be left out of the group. Hendry (1986:144) observes the Japanese techniques of standardising behaviour of preschoolers:

.....Much of the time this involves doing exactly what everyone else is doing, and occasionally one sees an individual dissident refusing to join in. Such a child may be left outside the classroom, or standing apart from the rest of the children in the playground. For the most part it is ignored.

Hendry (1987:46) states:

Children are expected to be happy, and anyone who is not, like the crying child, is classed as 'strange' or 'peculiar'. A child who shows reluctance to participate is encouraged to join in, but, if it refuses, will simply be ignored, as the teacher goes about the business of making life 'fun' for all the other children.

This form of classification sets apart a child who appears to be unhappy, by moving it out of the main group and emphasising its difference from the other children. ....A small child at this stage is keen to be just like its mates, and teachers take advantage of and encourage this propensity, making it unattractive to be 'different'.

The observation of Hendry (1986:144) captures a common scenario, of how a 'strange' or 'peculiar' child is treated by the teacher, and also other children in the classroom:

....the teacher encouraged the children to ostracise him by pointing him out as 'strange' and 'peculiar' (*okashii*), words applied to any child who cries or looks unhappy at kindergarten. 'Fancy not wanting to come to kindergarten', she had said at the beginning, 'what a funny boy.'

It is that “children learn the rules of group life through a combination of nonauthoritarian behavior-molding techniques and the fostering of the child’s own desire to adopt standards of classroom behavior” (Peak, 1991:186). As a consequence of this training process, Japanese children do not take long to become aware of the reality that resistance among the peer group is not possible. Peak (1991:190) states:

Japanese children soon learn, however, that to resist the system is to battle an army of friendly shadows. Authority resides with no one, and to change the collective habits of the group requires an impossible effort. To escape or rebel is to sever social contact with those who provide daily companionship and the warmth of social life.

Those who can foster group harmony are good and respected as members of the group, and those who have trouble meeting the group norm are bad, disrespected and alienated. This clear picture becomes familiar in the minds of Japanese children, as was the aim of the teacher. The code of group life is unwritten, but is naturally understood and acquired by children, who constantly practise the ideal way of classroom involvement as being members of the group. It is through the preparatory experience of preschool life that Japanese children become able to receive further training, where group life is more established and uniformity becomes more demanding among the peer groups. Peak (1991:187) states: “Mastering the unwritten code of preschool *shudan seikatsu* [group life] is the foundation on which individuals receive more elaborated training in group behavior and attitudes throughout their lives”.

With preschool experience as the base, children at the elementary and higher levels are encouraged to become more independently responsible for their group attitudes and behaviour. In elementary school classrooms, for example, children are divided into small groups, though they still remain symbolically as a member of one large class. This small-group system encourages children to become more independent by enforcing order and discipline among themselves within the group, and the elementary teachers indeed become able to enjoy the advantage of their students being able to maintain group attitudes and behaviours by themselves (Lewis, 1995). In high schools, the task of maintaining the order tends to be left entirely up to the students, who monitor their fellow students in the absence of teachers. Hills (1996:309) states:

In the elaborate hierarchy of a typical school, students are attached to a variety of groups, each headed by monitors, like the Australian public school prefect system — a group for cleaning the classroom, a group for planning excursions, a group for organising sport. When a child is seen to be straying from the norm for whatever reason, the teachers encourage his [sic] fellow students to discipline him [sic].

Thus, through the educational process based on group conformity from preschool onwards, Japanese children not only systematically learn an ideal group behaviour, but also become able to enforce and maintain order of group conformity among themselves. One of the issues with Japanese school group systems is, however, the heavy dependence

on, and the force of, peer pressure that play a strong contributory part as a means to motivate and guide conduct to maintain order. Inside classrooms where students form small groups for intensive collaboration (Lewis, 1984), the students' high morale is nurtured, but also some form of abuse or aggression, such as *ijime*, can be generated (Lebra, 2004:140). Sato (2004:227) also stresses the inequity for those nonconformists who do not fit in, stating that "standardized collectivity may comfort and motivate the majority and may rescue potential outcasts" (p.102), but "students more in charge of classroom management may abuse their powers, and some students may be picked on more than others, even to the severe extent of bullying (*ijime*)..." (p.227).

Lewis (1995:141) is concerned with the aggression involved in the service of classroom management at elementary schools. She observed several incidents in which children themselves act to maintain order by using physical threats, such as hitting a distracted individual to remind him to do his job or punching a group mate to make her behave during a cooperative activity, and the teacher looked on without comment. If this is the case at an elementary level, the functioning of peer group pressure could appear even more serious in high schools, where students are completely in charge of maintaining the order and enforcing discipline on their peers. Thus, a certain degree of peer pressure functions in service of classroom management where uniformity is highly required to achieve a group goal, and students exhibit negative attitudes towards individuals who stray and fail to participate or become cooperative. The excessiveness of such negative attitudes can often lead to acts of *ijime*, with the desire to eliminate or victimise those diverging individuals.

#### **A dark side of peer socialisation: the voices of Japanese students**

As far as the earlier observations of Hendry (1986) and Lewis (1995) are concerned, it is natural to postulate that the alienation of different individuals has been accepted and normalised in the service of classroom management where students are required to behave or work accordingly in order to accomplish a group task. It is, however, also important to point out that the dominant idea of eliminating a different individual is not only left within the service of classroom management, but does also permeate, and has been normalised, in ordinary peer interactions among students, who have been well educated with the spirit to conform. The actual voices of the Japanese students who participated in my interviews support this particular perspective.

The students responded that *ijime* is an acceptable behaviour which should be banished from school. They showed a negative response to the word '*ijime*' and expressed the hope for their schools to become *ijime*-free environments. What came up as 'dangerous' in the students' perspectives was, however, that the negative view of *ijime* is likely to turn into positive when a matter of conformity is the issue. The word 'necessary' was used by the students to permit and normalise the attitude to alienate a different individual during their social interactions, in terms of gathering the same types of people whom they want or need to be with. Here, *ijime* is entering into a permissible zone in the form of alienation. For example, Kenji said:

*.....it's necessary to exclude someone who stands against...someone different. We are the same, so we can get along. We have to get rid of the person different from us.*

Mayumi's view is more dominant in making alienation acceptable:

*Everyone tries to be with the same kind of people. You see, we have been told to behave like others since childhood...everything is about a group...we watch and follow what others do. We think that it's not right to do something different from what others are doing, and we don't accept those who are different.*

The students also admitted that it is a common event to exclude someone who fails to conform during social interactions, revealing that those who are not getting along with others or being difficult to interact with are targeted for victimisation. Two scenarios surfaced. One is the likelihood that an individual who is already outside of the peer group will be picked on. When interviewed the students said:

*Taka: Basically, those who are bullied don't try to interact with others. ...Some may do, but mostly they are quiet.*

*Akiko: Even when we talk to them, they don't reply. They say nothing and only respond yes or no.*

*Taka: So others become indifferent because it's not easy to interact with that kind of person. They are rejected and bullied because they are difficult to interact with.*

*Akiko: They don't belong to any group. They just stay alone at the corner of the classroom.*

*Tamaki: Difficult to interact with, is that why everyone bullies them?*

*Taka: Yes.*

The second scenario is that an individual who is found to be different within the group becomes the subject of ostracism, pushing him/her out of the group. The students are clear about what will happen when someone in a group stops conforming with the rest of the group members:

*Hiro: They become unhappy with the person staying in their group. They start getting rid of that person because they think that the person is not necessary in the group any more.*

*Tamaki: Why do they think that person is not necessary?*

*Hiro: Because that person does not get along well with the group members. It could be his behaviours or personality characteristics...something is different from other members of the group. Everyone else in the group is looking in the same direction, but only that person is not following the others. That's really a problem.*

*Tamaki: Is that a common thing to exclude someone different?*

*Hiro: Oh yes. Those who are against the rest are excluded. If a person has something that differs from others, it becomes the marking object. It is like 'that person is different from us, so let's get rid of him'.*



Moreover, the acceptance of *ijime* was implied by the dominant attitudes of the students who suggest that *ijime* is to be terminated as the reward for being cooperative. For example, Yoshiko said:

*....The person has to show that she can get along with others. Being quiet, she can't prove it. If others think that the person can get along with others, then they wouldn't keep bullying the person.*

Akiko also agreed with this view:

*Akiko: We tried to talk to the person being isolated when our teacher told us to do so. But she didn't really respond to us. If she could be a bit more cooperative, like try to join in or talk to us, then I think things can get better.*

*Tamaki: You mean, she won't be bullied if she changes her attitude?*

*Akiko: Yes, because that's why she is being rejected.... actually it's like she is rejecting being with us. If she wants to be a part, she's got to change herself.*

It is fairly clear that the students appear to blame the victim for being bullied. They have the idea that the problem lies in the victim and the victimisation is due to his/her own fault in not being cooperative. In this circumstance, the voices of victims are seldom heard or considered appropriately for intervention. Kenji said:

*Those who do ijime explain to the teacher that they did it because the person who is being bullied is the problem one, and the teacher believes them, and even starts to blame the person who is being bullied. ....The teacher listens more to those who do ijime, and thinks that the person who is being bullied wasn't doing the right thing and she thinks that's why he was bullied.*

Yuki also described the response of her classroom teacher:

*The teacher looked on ijime....she didn't do anything. It was like she was hesitating to.... Maybe she wasn't sure if she should.*

The problem raised here was that it is difficult for those students, who are willing to intervene, to resist *ijime* where *ijime* behaviour is accepted by others, or 'the majority'. The students reported that no one basically wants to stand out because such an act makes him/her in the minority, which is a disadvantage. They explained that their intention to act for intervention is easily interrupted as no one is supposed to or is brave enough to depart from 'the majority' and to stand out. Some of the students even admitted the direct or indirect involvement in *ijime* activities for the sake of securing their position in the majority. The following is what the students confessed with regard to their reluctance to intervene:

*Akiko: Everyone thinks that it's better to follow others rather than stand alone.*

*Kyoko: I think I wasn't quite aware of what was going on in the classroom. When I was talking to one of the boys, my friend whispered to me not to talk to him because he is 'dirty'. Then I realised he had been called 'baikin [germs]' and was always left alone. ...I should have protected him saying something like 'he shouldn't be treated like that', but I just followed what my friend said. ...I thought it would be better to do the same as others.*

*Aya: No one wants to stand alone to insist on their opinions. Everyone just prefers to stay quiet if others are quiet. It's hard to go and stop ijime where everyone else prefers not to get involved or shows support for the bullies.*

*Tomo: I know I should stop them, but I sometimes don't know whether I should tell them to stop it, because everyone else is excited and it's not right for me to disturb them. It will be awkward if it's only me going to tell them to stop.*

*Yoko: I feel sorry for the person [the victim], like others do. But if everyone else was following the [bullies'] instruction, there is no way that only me can refuse to do it [ijime].*

*Toshi: ...We are in the situation that we want to help the victim but we can't. That is why ijime becomes so serious.*

From the above students' statements, the existence of two major problems becomes visible. Firstly, the students display coldheartedness towards individuals who fail to become cooperative with the rest during social interactions, and judge these individuals as different. Japanese students do not simply leave these different individuals alone, but develop the idea and desire to actually hurt them and become engaged in with the act of *ijime*. Secondly, the students are easily influenced by the 'others' who represent the majority in their classroom. Their attitudes and behaviours depend almost entirely on the others, and their individual opinions, thoughts or feelings are suppressed by the pressure to conform with the majority. This tyranny of emulating the majority is most likely to aggravate the situation of *ijime*, maintaining the victim's vulnerability and inability to fight back.

## **Conclusion**

This paper examined the level of peer pressure existing in Japanese classrooms with the need for uniformity, and concluded that *ijime* behaviour is developed as a distinctive form of aggression among children who force themselves to maintain group conformity. The pressure to conform and the desire to alienate nonconformists predominate in the service of classroom management where a specific role needs to be fulfilled within the group, and also in the ordinary peer socialisation where children informally interact.

This paper supports the view that *ijime* is a product of Japanese education based on group conformity, in terms of creating the sphere where the idea of bullying different individuals, and of emulating those on the bullies' side to ensure not to stray from the majority, is developed and normalised. It was stated earlier that the reluctance to

administer interventions is seen as the desire for cover-ups in case of teachers and as the fear of retaliation in the case of students. This paper, however, brings another insight into interpreting such neglectful behaviour of the students and the teachers, inquiring if it is the normalisation of *ijime* behaviour within the school system and the acceptance of such normalisation by the majority, which prevent interventions by the students and the teachers.

The education system in Japan faces a serious problem in that children are engaged in *ijime*, and that the majority appears to support this tendency. These problems suggest the necessity to review the educational process in which uniformity is taught, and to respond to the risks involved in that process. The task of dealing with the problem of *ijime* remains challenging within the Japanese school system, where the dominant, normalised idea of eliminating different individuals is prominent in both the service of classroom management and ordinary peer socialisation. The Japanese education system is in the position of experiencing the dilemma that a certain degree of peer pressure is necessary to nurture standardised behaviour in children, which itself risks a specific group of individuals to be exposed to *ijime*. It is this dilemma that requires attention if any solution to the problem of *ijime* is sought.

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